DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 209 153 SO 013 704

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TITLE Graduate Training and Potential Employment for Political Scientists: The MIT Perspective.
PUB DATE 4 Sep 81
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (New York, NY, September 4, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Employment Opportunities; Employment Patterns; Employment Potential; Graduate Students; *Graduate Study; Higher Education; Job Skills; Job Training; *Political Science; Universities

ABSTRACT

This paper presents ideas on ways to help graduate students in political science to become more marketable for nonacademic positions. It also includes background information on the changing employment market for Ph.D.'s. These ideas were discussed at a 1980 meeting of teachers, graduate students, and recent Ph.D.'s at MIT. The purpose of the meeting was to help MIT political science faculty members determine how to adapt the graduate program in light of changing employment conditions. Factors identified as particularly significant with regard to employment of political science Ph.D.'s include the increase in private sector opportunities that are not directly tied to government expenditure, the decrease in entry-level academic positions, and the reduction in research opportunities caused by cut-backs in government funding for social science research. Several suggestions were offered to help faculty revise the political science graduate curriculum in line with these trends, including generating a cultural environment which encourages students to opt for nonacademic careers; stressing problem-solving skills in addition to academic research skills; helping students learn how to work within tight limits on money, time, and client interest; stressing the importance of oral and written communication skills; including more economics in the political science curriculum; focusing on quantitative research skills; and arranging internships in nonacademic work environments during graduate school. The conclusion is that college and university political science departments should provide training for their students which combines an understanding of the types of demands most often made in nonacademic careers with traditional research skills. (DB)

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GRADUATE TRAINING AND POTENTIAL EMPLOYMENT FOR POLITICAL SCIENTISTS: THE MIT PERSPECTIVE

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SP013704

For Presentation at the 1981 Annual Meeting of
the American Political Science Association, September 4, 1981.

Introduction. Over the past two years we at MIT have engaged in a continuing discussion of whether and how to adapt our graduate program in the light of changing employment conditions. As part of this effort, we convened a one-day, internal conference in February 1980 on "Political Science Training for Non-Academic Careers." This meeting was structured around a series of panels whose members were political science Ph.D.'s currently enjoying considerable success in non-academic positions. And its central focus was the following question: "How can the department, without forcing students to choose prematurely between academic and non-academic career options, better assist them to become highly marketable for non-academic positions?"

The phrasing of the question itself, I might note, highlights a key element of our present thinking. We are disinclined to operate a multiple-track graduate program, or even to ask students to select career paths early in the course of their graduate studies. We consider it healthy for students to strive to keep multiple options open until they can actually test the job market and determine which of the opportunities actually available most appeals to them. The key questions, of course, are how to keep several options available, and whether the effort to do so need interfere with the quest for excellence in scholarly training.

I believe that my invitation to participate in this panel stemmed directly from a report on our 1980 meeting that reached today's moderator, so I shall briefly describe it in a few moments. First, however, a little background.

The Changing Employment Market. Traditionally, the nation's leading social science departments have focused at the graduate level on training for professorial careers. It became apparent in the late seventies, however, that the employment market was changing significantly. Following the great burst of college enrollments during the first three postwar decades -- which was roughly paralleled by growth in support for social science research, in the number of doctorates awarded, and in the growth of academic employment -- little growth seemed likely over the next two. The nation's 18-24 year old cohort was scheduled to decline by 23 percent from 1980 to 1997. While some forecasters expected this reduction to be fully offset by growth in the proportion of young people attending college, by expanded foreign student enrollments, and by increases in mid-career training, most anticipated that total enrollments would fall substantially during this period. And none, to my knowledge, expected that they would grow. Further, Congress acted in 1978 to raise the minimum mandatory retirement age from 65 to 70, adding the likelihood of very slow faculty attrition to that of stable or declining enrollments. The prospect, in short, was a severe contraction of opportunities at the entry level.

The early effects of this downturn in entry-level demand were already apparent. Starting academic salaries for new Ph.D.s were up only about 50 percent from 1970 to 1980, even as the Consumer Price Index rose 112 percent. Though MIT and other leading departments were still able to place the vast majority of new Ph.D.s who wanted academic positions, the

number who could be placed at other leading institutions was clearly smaller than it had been a few years previously. And, in sharp contrast to the situation a decade earlier, there were very few teaching positions for students in the midst of dissertation writing. The doctorate in hand had become a virtual prerequisite of placement.

As we at MIT commenced discussing the implications of these developments during the 1979-80 academic year, however, several other traditional markets for our advanced degree graduates remained strong. Notably, we were experiencing little difficulty in placing our graduates who wanted them in attractive public service jobs and in policy research positions. The latter, of course, were highly varied. Some were at universities, others in public and quasi-public agencies, still others at private research institutions (such as Rand and Mitre) and consulting firms.

Since then, of course, these markets as well have experienced severe contraction. Despite their apparent diversity virtually all were, and are, dependent on public appropriations. If, as seems likely, the vise of government austerity continues to tighten over the next several years as it has since January 20, entry level jobs in these markets are likely to be even scarcer than on college and university faculties. (The Department of Defense and its contractors are likely to be exempt from the general pattern of real budget shrinkage, but it remains unclear just how much expansion they will achieve and the extent to which it will entail job opportunities for social scientists.)

Thus, we find our thoughts turning increasingly toward private sector opportunities that are <u>not</u> directly tied to government expenditure -- that may, indeed, expand in an era of investment-oriented tax cuts and public austerity. In beginning to address this topic, I have been surprised to discover that, among our post-1975 Ph.D. graduates and current doctoral candidates, half a dozen are already employed in the public affairs branches of AT&T, the Bank of America, Dupont, IBM, Chase Manhattan, and the Fluor Corporation. Among graduates further along in their careers, two have recently become, respectively, Corporate Director for Aerospace Planning and Analysis at General Dynamics and Manager of Government Relations at Texas Instruments.

Until this past year, we have tended to view each such career choice -- in the private, non-research, for-profit sector -- as basically unique. Only now are we beginning to recognize that private corporations have considerable reason to analyze the political constraints and risks associated with alternative action paths, that it is highly appropriate for them to draw upon the skills of trained political scientists in arriving at their judgments, and that some political scientists may find private sector careers highly rewarding.

For a profession that has long chronicled business lobbying, we have been surprisingly laggard in recognizing, or striving to promote, the potential business market for our students' services. In part, doubtless, the reason has been ideological. For all their devotion to pluralism in the classroom and their skepticism about attempted definitions of "the public interest," political scientists have tended to view public service

as essentially more virtuous than private, profit-oriented activity. Additionally, however, the neglect of private sector possibilities has reflected simple market realities. Only in the past few years have some of our most sophisticated corporations begun to recognize the value of broad political analysis -- involving, that is, more than the question of how to achieve favorable short-term Congressional action on specific provisions. As this market expands, one may reasonably anticipate that entry-level positions as political-policy-risk analysts will lead in some cases to careers in management helping to cope with the policy environment abroad, as well as at home, that large corporations must increasingly take into account.

Faculty Attitudes. There is still, I hasten to add, considerable disagreement among the MIT political science faculty with respect to the degree to which we should recognize such private sector employment opportunities in designing the graduate curriculum and advising students. Indeed, there remain some who are uncomfortable about giving high priority even to public and quasi-public employment options. These disagreements are still muted, because -- in typical academic fashion -- we have to date made no binding, collective decisions on these matters. Our individual perspectives, ways of advising students, research interests, and networks of outside contacts are slowly evolving, but there is no explicit pressure on those who feel resistant to the new directions.

Nor, let me emphasize, is there any disposition here to pooh-pooh their concerns. They are by no means an "old guard" simply left over from another era. The lines of disagreement, as near as I can discern them, have virtually nothing to do with seniority, and those most troubled include some of our most promiment scholars. Their argument, to simplify, runs essentially as follows: (1) Even if the academic job market is destined to contract over the next two decades, there will continue to be opportunities for first-rate new Ph.D.'s from the dozen or so leading institutions. (2) If the leading departments all rush to serve the ever-shifting employment market, the highest traditions of scholarship will be difficult, perhaps impossible, to maintain. Consequently, (3) perhaps we should simply admit fewer students, whose quality is such that they will almost surely prove placeable even in the shrunken academic market-place; this strategy will at least enable us to continue contrentrating on the historic mission that we are best able to perform.

Political Science at MIT. For a variety of reasons, this remains a distinct minority viewpoint at MIT, though most of us can accept that perhaps it ought to prevail at some other institutions. Why the distinction?

Political science training at MIT has from the outset had a less purely academic, or at least disciplinary, orientation than at most other elite universities. The department emerged from a series of multi-disciplinary policy studies during the fifties and early sixties, carried out within an Institute long committed to problem-solving as well as the advancement of theoretical knowledge. As the academic program took shape

-- the department awarded its first doctorates in 1961, and achieved full departmental status only in 1965 -- purely disciplinary concerns loomed increasingly large; but the faculty has always included a large cadre committed to policy research and analysis. And the department has always sent a high percentage of its advanced degree graduates into non-academic positions. As of June 1981, of 186 living Ph.D. alumni for whom we could obtain data, 47% (87) held other than faculty positions. Eighteen percent worked for private, for-profit companies (including consulting firms), 17% for non-profit institutions (such as Rand, Brookings, university research centers, and foundations), and 12% for public agencies.

Additionally, graduate training looms larger in the overall political science program at MIT than at most other universities. Whereas the typical political science department justifies its budget mainly with reference to undergraduate enrollments, the MIT department has relied upon a triad of relatively coequal activities: research, graduate teaching, and undergraduate teaching -- which, parenthetically, emerged historically in that order. The upshot is that we have a very high ratio of faculty to students, that approximately three-eighths of our class enrollments are graduate, and that at any time there are about twice as many graduate students registered as there are declared undergraduate majors.

Table 1

MIT Political Science Department, Spring 1981

Faculty size (excluding 3.5 FTE's on leave, 2.5 occupying administrative positions outside the department, and 2.0 vacancies):	22
Enrolled graduate students (excluding 34 registered as "non-resident"):	98
Declared undergraduate majors (including 9 double-majors):	47
Total class enrollments (36% graduate):	759

At present, the department is triply threatened. (1) The Reagan Administration's targeting of social science research for budget cuts has severely compounded the difficulty (which had been evident for several years even before 1981) of maintaining historic levels of research support for faculty released time and graduate student assistantships. (2) Undergraduate enrollments are stable, but the number of majors remains well below that of the late sixties, apparently for two reasons: (a) the nationwide level of undergraduate interest in politics has receded from the historic high levels of that period, and (b) there has been a tidal shift of undergraduate interest back toward engineering over the past decade, with the proportion of MIT undergraduates majoring in technical fields rising from roughly two-fifths to two-thirds.

(3) Finally, there is the question of the future of graduate education, with which we are concerned in this paper. Given the context of other threats that confront it, the department clearly has even more incentive than most to think about means of adapting actively to the changing job market rather than simply cutting back on enrollments. At the same time, the traditional pluralism with which it has defined its training mission, and the longstanding strength of its policy-oriented contingent, position it well to do so. So, at least, many of us judge.

Let me turn briefly now to our 1980 conference and its aftermath.

The 1980 Conference. The participants were MIT political science faculty and graduate students, together with 15 invited outside panelists -- all holders of political science doctorates (thirteen from MIT) who were currently pursuing non-academic careers.

The group convened on a Thursday evening for dinner, some brief agenda-setting remarks by the department head (myself), and a keynote address -- by Clark Abt, MIT Ph.D. 1965, founder and president of Abt Associates, and currently a member of the department's visiting committee. The conference proper, on the following day, was structured around three successive panels: on careers in government, policy research, and the private, for-profit sector respectively. Each panel included five of the invited outside participants, and was moderated by a faculty member. The panelists were asked to reflect informally on those features of their own training that had proven most useful to them in their careers, on what they would look for in potential job applicants freshly emerging from political science graduate programs, and on the most useful advice they might offer incoming students who wished to keep their non-academic career options open. About half of each session was devoted to the panelists' opening remarks, the remainder to interaction with the faculty-student audience.

The panelists included:

* the chief executive of a newspaper-t.v. station group (Peter Clark),

* the top career official in the Office of Management & Budget responsible for national security affairs (Edward R. Jayne),

* a state environmental commissioner (Dick Barringer),

* a big city hospital commissioner (David Rosenbloom),

* a deputy assistant director of the Congressional Budget Office (David Mundel),

* three consultants with very different practices (Clark Abt, Herbert Selesnick, and Joel Rosenblatt),

* a political analyst for AT&T (Rhonda Crane),

* a bureau chief in the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (Anne Cahn),

* a division chief in the Congressional Research Service (Stanley Heginbotham),

* the associate head of the Rand Social Science Department (Deborah Hensler),

* a policy advisor to top management at the Ford Motor Company (Paul Weaver), and

* a policy analyst in the office of the U.S. Secretary of Defense who had, until recently, served as a special assistant to the president of Texas Instruments (James Dukowitz).

Despite this diversity, a number of themes ran consistently through the panel discussions.

First and foremost, there was a strong, indeed passionate, consensus that social science departments have traditionally socialized their students to the view that academic careers are inherently far more satisfying and worthy of respect than any others. And there was general agreement that the prerequisite to all other success in training for non-academic careers is to avoid this tendency. (While several panelists noted that the MIT department had probably exhibited it less than most, they indicated that it had nonetheless taken them years to overcome a lingering sense that their career paths, however appropriate for them personally, in some sense represented failure.)

Stated more positively, the panelists stressed the importance of generating a cultural environment in which it is routinely expected that many of the best students will, even if attractive academic opportunities are available to them, opt for non-academic careers.

Second, those panelists with senior executive responsibilities, as well as most of those engaged in applied policy research, emphasized their need for analysts able to orient themselves toward the search for concrete solutions to specific problems. As Peter Clark put it, the Ph.D. credential from a prestige institution is widely recognized as an indicator of very superior ability and determination. But potential non-academic employers are likely to require considerable persuasion that candidates bearing this credential are in fact able to function as effective problem-solvers, and not solely as academic researchers.

Third, numerous panelists stressed the importance of knowing how to work within tight limits -- on money, time, and client interest. The consultants and government officials were particularly concerned about the ability of job candidates to assimilate and analyze large amounts of information quickly, and then effectively to communicate its implications with reference to specific client concerns. They made clear as well that, because resource constraints and client needs are remarkably varied, an important aspect of suitability for many policy analysis roles is great adaptability.

Fourth, there was universal agreement on the importance of communications skills, both oral and written. The emphasis was on clarity, conciseness, timeliness, and responsiveness to the particular concerns of each audience. Several panelists maintained that the most valuable courses they had taken in graduate school were those requiring oral presentations and the writing of short papers on tight deadlines.

Fifth, a majority of the panelists commented on the importance of having at least a basic knowledge of economics, and preferably a good deal more. International finance and industrial organization were mentioned as advanced subjects likely to prove particularly useful to political scientists in corporate environments, public finance and regulatory economics as especially pertinent to those engaged in public policy analysis.

Sixth, several of those from policy research institutions urged students interested in following their path to concentrate on the acquisition of advanced, particularly quantitative, research skills. Deborah Hensler noted, for example, that in hiring at Rand she looks for strong quantitative skills along with the abilities to utilize a broad range of research methods as appropriate for specific tasks, to synthesize diverse materials, to analyze logically, and to communicate clearly. Those panelists in managerial and policy advisory roles, on the other hand, tended to downplay the importance of quantitative skills -- while concurring with respect to Hensler's other criteria and, as noted above, assigning considerable weight to familiarity with economics.

Seventh, numerous panelists stressed the value of internships in non-academic work environments during graduate school, and urged the department to take advantage of its network of non-academic alumni to assist in placement. Many of those present volunteered that they would themselves be pleased to assist in this effort.

Implications and Consequences. What is most striking about these recommendations is their essential compatibility with contemporary thought about training for academic careers. There is room for dispute, of course, about whether students should be encouraged to think of themselves as problem-solvers, to worry much about client concerns, or to seek non-academic summer internships. But the other recommendations paralleled advice that most of us had for years been giving graduate students. And none of the panelists seems to be saying that students contemplating non-academic careers should neglect their training as scholars. Rather, the central message that emerged was that students should be encouraged to feel comfortable with diversity -- that is, with the idea that multiple satisfying career paths are potentially open to political scientists, and that they are themselves capable of performing multiple roles: as disciplinary theorists one day, as policy researchers concerned with solving practical problems the next. At some point one mind-set or the other is likely to emerge dominant, but it is far from clear that this need be early in a graduate student career, or indeed early in every post-doctoral career.

As noted previously, the effects of our 1980 conference have to date been reflected mainly in the evolution of individual attitudes and practices, as oppossed to collective decisions. But they have nonetheless, I believe, been highly significant. Most notably, I detect far greater openness among our faculty and graduate students to the idea that many of the latter, including some of the very best, will pursue non-academic careers, and that in doing so most will be able both to make valuable contributions and to find personal satisfaction. Second, the conference helped crystallize faculty sentiment that we should be more systematic in prodding the improvement of student oral and writing skills. This was scarcely a new idea, but the conference provided a major occasion for its reinforcement -- with implementation, as usual, falling mainly on individual faculty members. Third, a consensus has emerged that, in addition to encouraging students to take more economics, the department should itself endeavor to provide a solid core of courses in political economy. We already had one such course, taught jointly by an economist and a political scientist, on the books, and we shall be adding another during the coming academic year. Finally, the department has launched a fund-raising campaign to help support graduate summer internships.

These are clearly, in and of themselves, quite a modest set of developments. But if the trend continues, as now seems probable, these years will appear in retrospect to have marked an important turning point in the history of the department, during which its conceived training mission became far more pluralistic.

The question remains: to what extent, and how, can graduate students simultaneously be trained as potential scholars, administrators, and analytic problem-solvers? We are as a profession, I believe, just at the earliest stages of addressing this issue. Some departments will doubtless decide that the several tasks are irreconcilable at the highest level of quality, and will therefore content themselves with cutting enrollments and/or lamenting the high level of alumni unemployment. We at MIT are far from claiming to be in possession of any surefire methods. But we are inclined toward confidence in the abilities of our students as multiple role-players, and we are now thoroughly committed to the recognition of non-academic markets as legitimate objects of our pedagogic activity. Only time will tell precisely how much more is required, but I feel confident that these are the critical first steps toward successful adaptation to the market realities that we as a department and profession now face.